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Corporeal commotions: St Faustina and the Transnational Evolution of her Cult across the Twentieth Century

Abstract

This article provides the first scholarly exploration of the hagiographical representations and modern mysticism of St Faustina – a Polish nun who from 1931 had a series of visions of Christ who instructed her to have a devotional image painted and to institute a series of rosary-based prayers.

It examines the visual, material and corporeal practices associated with the transnational cult to the Merciful Heart of Jesus and excavates the ways in which the embodied and holistic intercessory strategies employed within this important strand of contemporary Catholic spirituality parallel, but also extend upon, the well-established seventeenth century devotional to the Sacred Heart of Jesus. It argues that the cult's theological flexibility and practical malleability, alongside the premium on corporeality within contemporary religiosity, has ensured its de-localization from its Polish genesis and adoption well beyond the Polish diaspora.

Drawing upon the lived religious experiences of a number of St Faustina's clients, often centred on healing and the dying, and exploring the evolving devotion to the saint through shrines as well as online, this article illuminates the contemporaneous as well as traditional impulses at play within this new extra-liturgical which has been designated 'the most dynamically developing devotion in the Christian world..

In 2011, as a young seminarian charged with spreading the Divine Mercy devotion to young people, Father Blazej Kwiatkowski of the Archdiocese of Gdansk reflected upon his own conversion experience as a teenager. Convinced that the Divine Mercy Chaplet – prayed on ordinary rosary beads – was a ““medicine”, especially as mercy, and the forgiveness of sins [through] divine grace really does heal and is for the soul what medicine is for the body’, he developed ‘Misericordin Misericordium’.¹ Packaged like a box of antibiotics (figure 1) under the slogan ‘available to purchase without prescription’, this modern marketing of an ancient Catholic devotional captured the attention of Pope Francis who early in his papacy had described the church as a ‘field hospital’ with a mission to ‘heal wounds and

¹ ‘From the life of the church’, *Messenger of Divine Mercy*, 2[64](2014), 10 - http://media.wix.com/ugd/58c7bd_6c21537e5a7b4adcae468f90f554c613.pdf (accessed 21 December 2016).

warm the hearts of the faithful'.² Alerted to Father Kwiatkowski's initiative by the Polish hierarchy, on 18 November 2013 after the Angelus, small boxes with an anatomically rendered heart and arteries encompassed by a crown of thorns were distributed by the pontiff to those gathered in St Peter's Square, with the prescription:

Today I would like to suggest a medicine to you ... It is a special medicine that will make the fruits of the Year of Faith concrete ... It is a "spiritual medicine" called Misericordia. A little box with 59 pills for the heart. The medicine is in this little box Take it! It is a rosary with which you can also pray the "Mercy chaplet", a spiritual help for our soul and to spread love, forgiveness and fraternity everywhere. Do not forget to take it because it is good for you, okay? It is good for your heart, your soul and your whole life!³

Canonized by Saint John Paul II in 2000 as 'the first saint of the new millennium' and feted by the former Pope as the 'great apostle of Divine Mercy in our time', the Polish nun Maria Faustina Kowalska had the first of a series of visions of Christ in 1931. Appearing as the Divine Mercy, with two rays radiating from His heart, the vision instructed Faustina to have a devotional image painted and to inaugurate a variety of devotional practices centred on commemoration of Christ's Passion and His remission of sins. Along the lines of the institution of devotion to the Miraculous Medal communicated through a vision to St Cathérine Labouré,⁴ Faustina believed herself to be instructed by Christ to materialise and popularise this vision who promised: 'By means of this Image I shall be granting many graces to souls'.⁵

Drawing upon a widespread recognition by philosophers and sociologists of religion of disorientation and discontent as the

² Interview with Fr Antonio Spadaro, SJ, Editor-in-chief *La Civiltà Cattolica*, 19 August 2013 – see https://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2013/september/documents/papa-francesco_20130921_intervista-spadaro.html (accessed 21 December 2016).

³ 'From the life of the church', 10.

⁴ R. Edwards, *The Miraculous Medal: As Revealed to St Catherine Labouré* (London: Catholic Truth Society, 2015).

⁵ St Maria Faustina Kowalska, *Diary: Divine Mercy in My Soul* (Stockbridge: Congregations of Marians of the Immaculate Conception, 2007), §570, 242. References are to the paragraph number, followed by the page number, and are hereafter in text.

fruits of late modernity,⁶ alongside a yearning for holism and healing⁷ and attraction to materialised and embodied intercessory strategies,⁸ this article seeks to use the Divine Mercy devotion as a case study for the resurgence of certain forms of religiosity in modern Europe. This Vatican-led re-packaging of the ancient practice of the rosary, annexed to the newer devotional prayers attributable to St Faustina, is just one prominent example of the popularity and malleability of the Divine Mercy devotion – a extra-liturgical adopted by an estimated 100,000 million Catholics worldwide,⁹ well adapted to conditions of religious pluralism and spread through unprecedented mass migration and diverse social media. Described as the ‘most dynamically developing devotion in the Christian world’,¹⁰ this article contends that an in-depth analysis of the evolution of this highly-particularized devotion illuminates salient dimensions of post-conciliar Catholicism and, moreover, casts light on a contemporary religious landscape which some have characterized as post-secular.¹¹

Given the surprising paucity of scholarly analysis of this newly established and immensely popular Catholic devotional,¹² this article provides a biographical introduction to St Faustina and a detailed discussion of the processes undergirding this making of a modern saint, which are themselves illuminating of broader changes

⁶ E.g. C. Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 2007) and M. A. Vásquez, *More than Belief: A Materialist Theory of Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

⁷ P. Heelas and L. Woodhead, *The Spiritual Revolution: Why Religion is Giving Way to Spirituality* (Chichester: Wiley, 2004) and A. Harris, ‘Holistic Spirituality’ in Mark Juergensmeyer and Wade Clark Roof (eds.), *The Encyclopedia of Global Religion, Volume One* (London: Sage Publications, 2011), 531-2.

⁸ M. B. McGuire, *Lived Religion: Faith and Practice in Everyday Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 119-29; D. Morgan (ed), *Religion and Material Culture: The Matter of Belief* (London: Routledge 2010); S. M. Promey (ed), *Sensational Religion: Sensory Cultures in Material Practice* (Yale: Yale University Press, 2014); S. Brent Plate, *A History of Religion in 5½ Objects: Bringing the Spiritual to its Senses* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2014); T. W. Jones and L. Matthews-Jones (eds), *Material Religion in Modern Britain: The Spirit of Things* (New York: Palgrave, 2015).

⁹ B. J. Groeschel, *I am With You Always* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2010).

¹⁰ G. Górný and J. Rosikoň, *Trust: In Saint Faustina's Footsteps* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2014), cover page.

¹¹ J. Habermas, ‘Secularism's Crisis of Faith: Notes on Post-Secular Society’, *New perspectives quarterly*, 25 (2008), 17-29; cf. J. A. Beckford, ‘Public Religions and the Postsecular: Critical Reflections’, *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 51(1)(2012), 1-19.

¹² For explorations of the evolution of the Divine Mercy image itself, and the ways in which male piety is sustained by the devotion, see A. Harris, ‘“For those with hardened hearts”: Masculinity, Embodiment and the Divine Mercy Devotion’ in L. Gemzöe, M. Keinanen and A. Maddrell, eds, *Gender and Religion in Present-Day Society* (London: Palgrave Macmillan), 259-281.

in twentieth-century Catholicism¹³ and the acceleration of canonization processes under papacy of John Paul II.¹⁴ It focuses on the corporeal metaphors and ‘cordial’ (used in the archaic sense to mean ‘of the heart’), gendered spiritual scripts that frame St Faustina’s relationship with the Merciful Heart of Jesus. Extending upon the spiritual manoeuvres exemplified by ‘Misericordin Misericordium’, it explores the implications of the ‘corporeal commotions’ fostered by the Divine Mercy in the embodied practices of St Faustina’s devotees. Alongside the materialization and monumentalization of the Divine Mercy image through shrines across the world and the florid, flamboyant and ubiquitous circulation of the Divine Mercy image, this article also charts the evolving representational manifestations of St Faustina herself. It argues that a personalised and playful focus on the seer are the most recent iterations of this spiritual phenomenon and while some of the images of this female religious within official circles and institutional settings have remained staid, nondescript and one-dimensional, there is an increasing experimentation (largely within grassroots folk piety) with her presentation and performative intercession, centred on healing and a ‘good death’, and manifested in print, plaster and across the internet.

The Making of the Saint: from Helena Kowalska to St Faustina

Helena Kowalska was born on 25 August 1905 in Głogowiec, which was then within the Russian Empire but is now acknowledged as present-day Poland. Hagiographical biographies describe the poverty of her rural background, her devout parents and, ‘from her earliest childhood, her deep and unaffected piety and love of

¹³ In an analogous vein see G. Atkins (eds), *Making and Remaking Saints in Nineteenth-Century Britain* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2016), 1-7 and M. Heimann, ‘The Secularisation of St Francis of Assisi’, *British Catholic History*, 33(3)(2017), 401-420.

¹⁴ M. Walsh, ‘Pope John Paul II and His Canonizations’, *Studies in Church History*, 47(2011), 415-37.

God in the Blessed Sacrament'.¹⁵ In conformity with the prototype of nineteenth- and twentieth-century Marian visionaries, often from peasant stock and poorly-educated (e.g. Lourdes, Fatima, Medjugorje)¹⁶ recent biographers stress the remote place of her birth, the truncated nature of Faustina's education, her child-like trust in Christ, and the opposition of her parents to her desire to enter religious life from a young age for reasons of finance.¹⁷ At the age of sixteen Faustina went into service but was prompted to seek admission to a convent by a vision of the suffering, naked Christ (while herself dancing with a young man) who communicated His frustration at her procrastination and commanded her to go to Warsaw.¹⁸ While she was initially refused by a number of orders for want of financial resources, the Congregation of the Sisters of Our Lady of Mercy agreed to take her if she amassed some monies before entry, and she worked for various families before entering the convent in 1925, taking the name in religion of Maria Faustina. Throughout her short lifetime as a female religious, she worked as a cook and baker, cleaner and gardener within convents in Warsaw, Kraków, Płock and Vilnius, and experienced frequent visions and mystical encounters with Christ. In marked parallel with another twentieth-century female religious, Thérèse of Lisieux,¹⁹ who indeed was an inspiration and prayer confessor for the saint,²⁰ Faustina also recorded the intricacies of her spiritual life in a diary, and similarly died of a protracted battle with tuberculosis at the young age of thirty-three, on 5 October 1938, in Kraków where she was buried.

¹⁵ P. A. Hargest-Gorzelak, *Divine Mercy: The Devotion and Graces as Revealed to Saint Faustina Kowalska* (London: Veritas, 2000), 7.

¹⁶ S. Zimdars-Swartz, *Encountering Mary: From LaSalette to Medjugorje* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991).

¹⁷ Górny and Rosikon, *Trust*, 22-23; 46, 49.

¹⁸ A. Witko, *The Divine Mercy and Sister Faustina* (London: Catholic Truth Society, 2000), 10.

¹⁹ A. Harris, 'Bone Idol? British Catholics and Devotion to Saint Thérèse of Lisieux' in N. Christie, M. Gauvreau and S. Heathorn, eds, *The Sixties and Beyond: Dechristianization as History in North America and Western Europe, 1945-2000* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2013), 429-52 and S. Deboick, 'The Creation of a Modern Saint' in P. Clarke and T. Claydon, eds, *Saints and Sanctity* (Woodbridge: Suffolk, 2011), 376-89.

²⁰ J. Szałasdek, *The Gospel of Łagiewniki: Life and Work of Saint Sister Faustina* (Kraków: Biały Kruk, 2007), 73; Górny and Rosikon, *Trust*, 86-7.

The *Diary*, first published (in an approved version in 1987) as *Divine Mercy in My Soul*, presented an intimate insight into Faustina's interior life and her professed vocation as 'secretary of My mercy' – a title she has Jesus repeatedly apply to her in the many visions she relates (*Diary*, §1605, 570). Advised in 1933 by her first spiritual confessor and academic theologian, Father Michał Sopoćko, to keep a record of her conversations with and messages from Jesus,²¹ the six surviving notebooks range across chronologies, encompassing her childhood and first vision, a reconstruction of her writings between 1933–4 (as she was persuaded to burn this first notebook by an 'imaginary angel')²² and contemporaneous experiences. While fraught with interpretative challenges, especially in relation to the role of her confessors (and posthumous promoters) in framing her narratives (much like St Marguerite Marie Alacoque's relationship to St Claude de la Colombière in the promotion of the Sacred Heart, or the redaction of Thérèse of Lisieux's *Story of a Soul* by her sister and religious superior), the text nonetheless stands as a key reference-point for the construction (and application) of the devotion, as will be explored. Foremost amongst these accounts of her extraordinary visions and communications is that on 22 February 1931 when Sister Faustina was praying in her cell at the convent at Płock. She recorded that she saw:

the Lord Jesus clothed in a white garment. One hand [was] raised in the gesture of blessing, the other was touching the garment at the breast. From beneath the garment, slightly drawn aside at the breast, there were emanating two large rays, one red, the other pale. In silence I kept my gaze fixed on the Lord ... (*Diary* §47, 24).

She then noted:

²¹ Father Michał Sopoćko also kept a diary, published in Polish in 2010. Its increased circulation in English will further enhance the cult of St Faustina, as well as the cause for his canonization (which has been opened). See Górny and Rosikon, *Trust*, 144 and http://www.vatican.va/news_services/liturgy/saints/2008/ns_lit_doc_20080928_sopocko_en.html (16 December, 2016).

²² Witko, *Divine Mercy*, 24; Górny and Rosikon, *Trust*, 142.

Jesus said to me ‘Paint an image according to the pattern you see, with the signature: “Jesus, I trust in You”. I desire that this image be venerated, first in your chapel, and [then] throughout the world.

I promise that the soul that will venerate this image will not perish’ ... (*Diary* §47–8, 24).

From this time onwards, all Faustina’s subsequent visions reinforced and refined this representation of Jesus as Divine Mercy, and I have written elsewhere about the artistic complexities and clerical sensitivities involved in materialising these visions²³ – culminating in the eventual dominance of a 1943 votive picture produced by Adolf Hyła and housed in the Łagiewniki convent chapel (figure 2).²⁴ In Faustina’s lifetime, the devotion also developed beyond the image to include, from a vision on 13 September 1935, a series of set prayers – a Divine Mercy chaplet and a Novena to be prayed on rosary beads to ‘appease his wrath’, especially at the time of death (*Diary* §687, 282). The institution of the Divine Mercy Hour (observed at 3 o’clock to commemorate the time of Christ’s death) was instructed in two subsequent visions in October 1937 and January 1938 (*Diary* §1320, 474; §1572, 558).

During her time at the Vilnius convent between 1933-6 under the spiritual direction of Father Sopoćko, Faustina predicted that the promotion of the Divine Mercy would be suppressed. Writing in her diary on 8 February 1935, she informed her confessor:

There will come a time when this work, which God is demanding so very much, will be as though utterly undone. And then God will act with great power, which will give evidence of its authenticity. It will be a new splendour for the Church, although it has been dormant in it from long ago (*Diary* §378, 171).

²³ J. Garnett and A. Harris, ‘Canvassing the Faithful: Image, Agency and the Lived Religiosity of Devotion to the Divine Mercy’ in G. Giordan and L. Woodhead, eds, *Prayer in Religion and Spirituality* (Leiden-Boston: Brill, 2013), 77-102.

²⁴ M. Tarnawska, *Blessed Sister Faustina Kowalska. Her Life and Mission* (London: Veritas, 1993); Górny and Rosikon, *Trust*, 209, 217.

This proved to be correct, although there was immediate growth in the devotion after the ‘terrible war’ of which Faustina spoke,²⁵ through the foundation of the Congregation of the Sisters of the Divine Mercy, continuous public access to the Divine Mercy image in the Kraków chapel during and after World War II, and the proliferation of various graces through intercession.²⁶ Nevertheless, in part through controversies about the Divine Mercy image,²⁷ in 1959 Cardinal Ottaviani moved to have Faustina’s *Diary* placed on the ‘Index of Forbidden Books’ and there it remained until Pope Paul VI abolished the Index itself in 1966. The Divine Mercy devotion was therefore suspect and officially suppressed within the Catholic Church from 1959 until 1978. Concerns were expressed about inaccurate versions of the *Diary* circulating and being translated into French and Italian,²⁸ and there was clearly more general anxiety in the Vatican about how to maintain control over its interpretation and its association (through the red and white rays, and references in the *Diary* to Poland as beloved by Christ) with Polish nationalism. A rehabilitation process was opened in 1965 by then Archbishop of Kraków, Karol Józef Wojtyła who compiled a dossier on Faustina and commenced the beatification process in 1968 (which concluded in 1993). The influence of John Paul II on the rapid legitimization of the devotion – and its incorporation into a longer standing, mythologized vision of Kraków as a site of spiritual power – is not to be underestimated.²⁹ Yet popular devotion to the Divine Mercy also flourished in Poland under wartime conditions³⁰ and post-war communism,³¹ and indeed spread with the Polish diaspora to France, the

²⁵ C. M. Odell, *Faustina: Apostle of the Divine Mercy* (Indiana: OSV Press, 1998), 153–60.

²⁶ Górny and Rosikon, *Trust*, 227.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 229–231.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 235.

²⁹ A. Niedźwiedź, ‘Mythical Vision of the City: Kraków as the “Pope’s City”’, *Anthropology of East Europe Review* 27(2)(2009), 208–226; c.f. R. A. Stackpole, *Divine Mercy: A Guide from Genesis to Benedict XVI* (Stockbridge: Marian Press, 2008) who asserts the devotion’s longevity and universality and robustly contests its Polish-inflected context.

³⁰ Górny and Rosikon, *Trust*, 212–3.

³¹ T. Zaremba, *Mercy is Forever: The Story of the Devotion to the Mercy of God* (CreateSpace publishing, [1957] 2010).

United States,³² Australia and indeed Britain,³³ particularly through the ministry of a Marian priest based in Henley-on-Thames, Father Jerzy Jarzębowski.³⁴ In the US, another Marian priest, Fr Julian Chróściechowski, propagated the devotion throughout the English-speaking world through publications such as *Devotion to Divine Mercy in our Day: A Historical and Critical Study* (1976) and the cure leading to her beatification was verified through the experiences of a Bostonian woman, Maureen Digan.³⁵

Worship of the Divine Mercy is now unequivocally transnational and de-localized, encompassing most countries throughout the world but also rooted in a Polish heritage through the construction of a massive basilica and shrine complex in the suburbs of Kraków. The Sanctuary of Divine Mercy was built at Łagiewniki, in the tradition of 'charismatic spatialization',³⁶ in the grounds of the Sisters of Our Lady of Mercy convent where St Faustina for a time resided and where the Hyła Divine Mercy image continues to be venerated. It was consecrated in 2002, with great ceremony and emotion, by Pope II³⁷ and since 2005 around two million pilgrims have visited annually, swelling to around 4 million in 2016 when Kraków hosted World Youth Day (WYD).³⁸ Around half the number of annual visitors are Polish devotees, but a further million each year come from more than 80 different countries and are supported by more than 14,000 international chaplains.³⁹ This religious vitality has been further enhanced by the worldwide circulation, in more than two dozen different

³² S. Michalenko, *Mercy My Mission: The Life of Sister Faustina H. Kowalska SMDM* (Stockbridge: Marian Press, 1987), 251.

³³ Hargest-Gorzela, *Divine Mercy*, 242.

³⁴ Górny and Rosikon, *Trust*, 216-7 and Czackowska, *Faustina*, 12-18.

³⁵ F. Carroll, *Loved, Lost, Found: 17 Divine Mercy Conversions* (Stockbridge: Marian Press, 2013), 19-31.

³⁶ J. Eade and M. Sallnow (eds), *Contesting the Sacred: The Anthropology of Pilgrimage* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2000), 8.

³⁷ A. Bujak, *Łagiewniki: An Opportunity for the World* (Kraków: Biały Kruk, 2012).

³⁸ <http://worldyouthday.com/pope-francis-invites-catholic-youth-to-live-fearlessly> (accessed 16 December 2016).

³⁹ Personal Communication (via email) with Sister Gregoria ZMBA, Łagiewniki Sanctuary, Kraków, Poland, 29 June 2012.

languages, of the *Diary, Divine Mercy in My Soul* – leading to its designation as ‘the world’s most published work of twentieth-century Christian mysticism’.⁴⁰ Within a crowded pilgrimage scene, which has seen the resurgence of ‘traditional’ routes such as the Camino⁴¹ and the transformation of Marian sites like Lourdes through global Catholicism,⁴² the newcomer Łagiewniki combines the cults of St Faustina and now St John Paul II, with its traditional devotions (e.g. the rosary, benediction) and transnational aspirations (e.g. underground ‘international chapels’).

A Heart Enflamed and Transplanted: Female Mysticism and the Divine Mercy

Writing in 1938 in her *Diary* about her spiritual preparations for reception of Holy Communion, Sister Faustina made the following personal address to Christ:

Today, I am preparing myself for Your coming as a bride does for the coming of her bridegroom. ... Our hearts are constantly united. ... The presence of God penetrates me and sets aflame my love for Him. There are no words; there is only interior understanding. I drown completely in God, through love. ... I invite Jesus into my heart, as Love. You are Love itself. All heaven catches the flame from You and is filled with love. And so my soul covets You as a flower yearns for the sun. Jesus, hasten to my heart, for You see that, as the flower is eager for the sun, so my heart is for You. I open the calyx of my heart to receive Your Love.

When Jesus came to my heart, everything in my soul trembled with life and with warmth. Jesus, take the love from my heart and pour it into Your love, Your love which is burning and radiant, which knows how to bear each sacrifice, which knows how to forget itself completely (*Diary* §1805-1809, 638–9).

These highly charged, erotic, almost orgasmic yearnings for mystical union and descriptions of spiritual ecstasy should be placed in context of a long history within the Western Christian tradition of women religious framing their relationship with

⁴⁰ Górny and Rosikon, *Trust*, 8.

⁴¹ S. Sánchez y Sánchez and A. Hesp, eds, *The Camino de Santiago in the 21st Century: Interdisciplinary Perspectives and Global Views* (London: Routledge, 2017).

⁴² C. Notermans, M. Turolla and W. Jansen, ‘Religious routes and routines: African migrants moving in and out of Paris’ in J. Garnett and A. Harris, eds, *Rescripting Religion in the City: Migration and Religious Identity in the Modern Metropolis* (London: Routledge, 2013), 149-162.

God (and Christ) in terms of marriage, maternity, and the language of the Song of Songs.⁴³ Women like Hildegard of Bingen, Catherine of Siena, Teresa of Avila or indeed Marguerite Marie Alacoque in her descriptions of the Sacred Heart, used a similar rhetorical register. St Faustina's embodied experiences of 'revelations, visions, hidden stigmata, [the] experience of the Lord's Passion, the gift of bi-location, reading human souls, prophecies [and] the rare gift of mystical ... wedding'⁴⁴ therefore placed this newly canonised saint with a distinctive, but highly developed strand of (gendered) spirituality within the Catholic church.

Yet the situation of St Faustina within this legitimizing legacy of distinguished writers of the spiritual life,⁴⁵ which theologians and clerics have felt empowered to do following her rehabilitation and canonization, underestimates the potency of her claims then (and the application of them now) to unmediated access to the divine and the interdependence, indeed interpenetration, between herself and Christ. The symbol of the heart, understood as metaphor but also a viscerally envisioned actuality, is at the centre of these written meditations:

My Jesus, penetrate me through and through so that I might be able to reflect You in my whole life. Divinize me so that my deeds may have supernatural value. ...I desire to reflect Your compassionate heart, full of mercy; I want to glorify it. Let Your mercy, Oh Jesus, be impressed upon my heart and my soul as a seal ... (*Diary* §1242, 449).

For St Faustina, this modeling of Divine Mercy required the conformance of her heart to the Heart of Christ, as when she was commanded in a vision:

The Heart of My beloved must resemble Mine; from her heart must spring the fountain of My

⁴³ C. Walker Bynum, "...And Woman His Humanity": Female Imagery in the Religious Writing of the Later Middle Ages' in C. Walker Bynum, S. Harrell and P. Richman, eds, *Gender and Religion: On the Complexity of Symbols* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1986), 260-2 and J. Machniak, 'The Mysticism of Sister Faustina Kowalska Against the Background of the Western Christian Tradition' in A. Jackowski, ed, *A New Jewel in the Crown of Cracow* (Kraków: Peregrinus Cracoviensis, z. 11), 83-9.

⁴⁴ E. Siepak, 'The Spiritual Life of Sister Faustina Major Features' in Jackowski, *New Jewel*, 59-82.

⁴⁵ S. Coleman and J. Elsner, eds, *Pilgrimage: Past and Present in World Religions* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995), 133.

mercy for souls (*Diary* §1148, 421)

Often the language of the *Diary* moves from mimesis or replication to divinization, (re) incarnation, penetration or transplantation, as when she writes:

My spirit is with God, my veins are filled with God, so I do not look for Him outside myself. He, the Lord, penetrates my soul just as a ray from the sun penetrates clear glass. When I was enclosed in my mother's womb, I was not so closely united with her as I am with my God. There, it was unawareness; but here, it is the fullness of reality and the consciousness of union (*Diary* §883, 346).

As Caroline Walker Bynum has reflected of women's devotional writing in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, 'female erotic experience, childbirth and marriage became major metaphors for spiritual advancement, for service of neighbor and for union with the divine'.⁴⁶ These resonances in metaphorical medium and spiritual expression across the centuries are striking, but also belie subtle changes when contextualized in a twentieth-century, interwar European setting. Sister Faustina often speaks of Jesus as 'my Mother' (*Diary* §230, 115; §239, 119; §249, 123; §264, 128; §298, 138; §505, 218), and repeatedly describes Christ as an emotionally sensitive and tender lover with whom full union is possible. Through these spiritual movements, she thereby (re)asserted the legitimacy of the female body as an appropriate site for the experience (and emulation) of the divine in an accessible register and a modern setting. Yet in the context of an ultramontane, highly centralized pre-Vatican II Catholic Church in which visions were treated with heightened scrutiny and suspicion,⁴⁷ Sister Faustina's articulated desire that Christ should 'divinize' her was an audacious claim to female sanctity that implicitly bypassed adjudicating clerical processes.

⁴⁶ C. Walker Bynum, *Jesus as Mother: Studies in the Spirituality of the High Middle Ages* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), 135-46 and Walker Bynum, "...And Woman His Humanity", 275.

⁴⁷ E.g. R. Harris, *Lourdes: Body and Spirit in the Secular Age* (London: Allen Lane, 1999).

Indeed in the suppression of the devotion between 1959 and 1979, Bishop Paweł Socha has asserted that the censure of the Holy Office was roused by mistranslations of the *Diary*, as ‘the Polish re-typed text contained many mistakes suggesting that Sister Faustina required the worship of her own heart’.⁴⁸ Such an interpretation would, of course stray into heterodoxy – although in the popular practice of the cult of the saints across the centuries, such fine dogmatic distinctions have often tended to blur. Nevertheless, it seems clear that the shocking immediacy and erotically charged nature of Sister Faustina’s claims to communion with Jesus, the multiplication and spread of unauthorized versions of the Divine Mercy image, alongside the intertwining of her cult with a particularized Polish nationalism, were key reasons for profound institutional and (male) clerical discomfort.

Moreover, St Faustina’s devotion to the (Merciful) Heart of Jesus needs to be situated against earlier devotions to Christ’s sacred humanity and the codification of these spiritual traditions in the cult of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, based upon the visions to the Visitandine religious, St Margaret Mary Alacoque (1647–90). Despite its widespread popularity with the laity (and particularly female religious) throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth century, devotion to the Sacred Heart (codified in mass produced *Saint Sulpice* statues of Jesus with pierced heart exposed) only obtained universal legitimacy when added to the Roman Catholic liturgical calendar in 1856. This papal imprimatur was reinforced by Pope Leo XIII’s consecration of the entire human race to the Sacred Heart of Jesus in his Encyclical *Annum Sacrum* (1899). A highly influential encouragement and reiterated endorsement within Sister Faustina’s lifetime was the canonization of Sister Margaret Mary Alacoque in 1920, and an extended consideration of her visions within Pope Pius XI’s 1928 encyclical *Miserentissimus Redemptor*, which centred on the need for acts of reparation and

⁴⁸ P. Socha, ‘Development of the Worship of Divine Mercy in Poland and Abroad’ in Jackowski, *New Jewel*, 126.

atonement.⁴⁹ Sister Faustina's visions were clearly influenced by and extended upon this established imagery⁵⁰ and the ubiquitous associated metaphors surrounding the (sacred) heart.⁵¹ Using anatomically suggestive imagery such as calyx and veins, her *Diary* augmented the metaphor of the Divine Heart to encompass devotion to the Divine Blood as another site of meditation and mediation, and this element of the cult has now been annexed to that of St John Paul II through the veneration of a vial of his blood at the recently-completed Basilica also on the extensive Łagiewniki convent grounds.⁵² In a striking (and symptomatic) reflection, Sister Faustina wrote:

All my virginal love is drowned eternally in You, O Jesus! I sense keenly how Your Divine Blood is circulating in my heart; I have not the least doubt that Your most pure love has entered my heart with Your most sacred Blood (*Diary* §478, 208).

In an earlier vision, she recorded Jesus as saying 'You are a sweet grape in a chosen cluster; I want others to have a share in the juice that is flowing within you' (*Diary* §393, 176) and in this Eucharistic vein, Sister Faustina recalls an interior plea (when receiving Holy Communion) "Jesus, transform me into another host! I want to be a living host for You", endorsed by the response of Christ "You are a living host, pleasing to the Heavenly Father' (*Diary* §1826, 643). In ostensible usurpation of the prerogative of the priest – given that touching the physical host was prohibited in the pre-conciliar church – Sister Faustina records in her notebooks repeated instances of the host coming to 'rest in her hand' (e.g. *Diary* §44, 23). These occurrences were explicitly linked to acts of reparation (on behalf of her religious community, or the universal church) and are presented as reinforcing her mystical but also physical,

⁴⁹ D. Morgan, *The Sacred Heart of Jesus: The Visual Evolution of a Devotion* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2008), 29-38.

⁵⁰ There was, for example, an image of the Sacred Heart in her family home, she prayed frequently before porcelain statue in the Łagiewniki convent and she received visions of the Merciful Jesus during a procession in honour of the Sacred heart in June 1936 - Górny and Rosikon, *Trust*, 35, 38, 171.

⁵¹ See D. Morgan, *Visual Piety: A History and Theory of Popular Religious Images* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998) and *The Embodied Eye: Religious Visual Culture and the Social Life of Feeling* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012).

⁵² A. Niedźwiedz, 'Framing the Pope within the Urban Space: John Paul II and the Cityscape of Kraków' in V. Hegner and J. Margy, eds, *Spiritualising the City: Agency and Resilience of the Urban and Urbanesque Habitat* (London: Routledge, 2016), 81-102.

embodied union with Christ. The real presence of Christ in the host is reinforced by the inner voice Sister Faustina heard on another of these occasions: ‘I heard these words from the Host: “I desired to rest in your hands, not only in your heart.”’ (*Diary* §160, 89). In these accounts, Sister Faustina’s physical person, and her hands in particular, act as a tabernacle and even an embodied conduit of the ‘real presence’. Narrated within a contemporary setting, rather than the comfortably distant context of a medieval convent, it is clear that these writings which asserted the sanctity of (Faustina’s) female body and suggested the immediacy and accessibility of sacred power beyond clerical, sacerdotal structures were deeply destabilizing of a hierarchical, gendered orthodoxy and a modernist mindset. Perhaps Pope Pius XII had some of these misgivings in mind, as well as longer-term anxieties about the feminization of religion,⁵³ when he reaffirmed the relevance, rationality and authenticity of devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus in his 1957 Encyclical, *Haurietis Aquas*. Addressing charges of ‘sentimentalism’ and that the devotion was ‘ill-adapted, not to say detrimental, to the more pressing spiritual needs of the Church and humanity in this present age’,⁵⁴ he dismissed those who, amongst other complaints, viewed it as ‘a type of piety nourished not by the soul and mind but by the senses and consequently more suited to the use of women, since it seems to them something not quite suitable for educated men’.⁵⁵ Practices such as the formation of confraternities of the Sacred Heart for laymen, or the promotion of the ‘enthronement of the image of the Sacred Heart’ in Catholic houses (to be installed by the male head of the household and blessed by the parish priest) were designed to address these mid-twentieth century concerns by inscribing a domesticated male piety while reinforcing

⁵³ T. Van Osselaer and T. Buerman, ‘Feminization Thesis: A Survey of International Historiography and a Probing of the Belgian Ground’, *Revue d’Histoire Ecclésiastique* 103(2)(2008), 1-31 and Gemzöe, Keinanen and Maddrell, eds, *Gender and Religion*, 1-28.

⁵⁴ http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/pius_xii/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-xii_enc_15051956_haurietis-aquas_en.html, §10 (accessed 18 December, 2016).

⁵⁵ *Ibid*, §12.

the centrality of institutional, clerically-auspiced religiosity.⁵⁶ Alongside its syncretic annexation of components of the Sacred Heart legacy, in particular its mobilization for the sanctification of suffering,⁵⁷ the remainder of this article explores the ways in which the cult of the Divine Mercy and St Faustina's hagiography have deployed a novel and vibrant devotional arsenal, tailored to contemporaneous needs, by drawing upon the metaphorical potentialities and visceral cast of St Faustina's *Diary*. Alongside the embodied intercessory strategies facilitated by the Divine Mercy image itself, the increasing biographical intimacy and subjectivity of St Faustina in lay devotional art and in the lived religious experiences of her devotees,⁵⁸ are further illustrations of the corporeal manifestations and expectations (chiefly immediacy, accessibility and the sensory) of modern sanctity, especially through a Pope John Paul II cast.⁵⁹

Shrines and Ex Votos: St Faustina as Popularized and Commoditized

Epitomized by the Basilica of the Divine Mercy in Łagiewniki (with its mosaic icon of Christ and St Faustina in the Hungarian Underground Chapel), Divine Mercy shrines have proliferated across Poland and are now well established around the world. Diverging from the older, more traditional and clerically established historic

⁵⁶ A. Harris, *Faith in the Family: A Lived Religious History of English Catholicism, 1945-82* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013), 69-75 and T. Van Osselaer, "'From that Moment on, I was a Man!': Images of the Catholic Male in the Sacred Heart Devotion" in P. Pasture and J. Art, eds, *Gender and Christianity in Modern Europe: Beyond the Feminization Thesis* (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2012), 121-36.

⁵⁷ P. M. Kane, "'She Offered Herself Up': The Victim Soul and Victim Spirituality in Catholicism", *Church History* 71(1)(2002), 80-119; R. Burton, *Holy Tears and Holy Blood: Women, Catholicism and the Culture of Suffering in France, 1840-1970* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004) and R. Orsi, *Between Heaven and Earth: the Religious Worlds People Make and the Scholars who Study Them* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 19-47.

⁵⁸ McGuire, *Lived Religion*, 12-15; N. Ammerman, ed, *Everyday Religion: Observing Modern Religious Lives* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006) and R. Orsi, 'Everyday Religion and the Contemporary World: The Un-Modern, or What was Supposed to Have Disappeared but Did Not' in S. Schielke and L. Debevec, eds, *An Anthropology of Everyday Religion* (Oxford: Berghahn, 2012), 147-60.

⁵⁹ In a confessional vein, though highlighting salient elements of the recent proliferation of canonizations, see P. Zaleski, 'The Saints of John Paul II', *First Things: A Monthly Journal of Religion and Public Life* 161(2006), 28-32.

foundations such as the US Marian Fathers Shrine in Eden Hill, Stockbridge Massachusetts or the UK Marian Centre of the Divine Mercy Apostolate in Ealing, more recent shrines have assumed flamboyant and monumental proportions to replicate the Divine Mercy image and its spiritual functions.⁶⁰ At Cagayan de Oro in the Philippines, for example, pilgrims climb up the fifteen-metre statue built in 2008, using stairs concealed in the pink and white ‘rays’, to penetrate into the chest of a painted concrete Merciful Jesus.⁶¹ When they enter into this heart-shaped cavity to pray and supplicate to the Lord and his ‘secretary of Mercy’, they literally enact the injunction to embody and enter into the Merciful Heart of Jesus as ‘we all make up one organism in Jesus’ (*Diary* §1364, 488). In the development and spread of the cult of the Divine Mercy, ordinary laymen and women have also used St Faustina’s life story and writings to provide a personalised repertoire for cultivation of their own relationships with Christ. Consciously (and unconsciously), they draw inspiration from the *Diary* to describe, to internalise and sometimes to emulate in embodied terms, a personal commitment to these devotional practices. These hyper-physical, ‘cordial’ scripts which place an intense emphasis upon the Incarnation and theological concepts such as *Imago Dei*, constitute a ‘vernacular theology’⁶² in which devotees map their encounters with the divine in embodied, three-dimensional and often visceral terms. Such a devotional approach is well articulated by Frédéric, a French Olympic sportsman who spoke in 2012 at a Divine Mercy International Congress about his conversion more than a decade earlier. Recounting the ways in which St Faustina’s *Diary* left him ‘spellbound’, he went on to relate:

⁶⁰ See also the 18-foot statue of an African-rendered Divine Mercy at the Marian apparition site of Kibeho – <http://www.kibeho.org/en/statue.php> (accessed 12 December 2017).

⁶¹ See <http://www.atlasobscura.com/places/christ-of-the-divine-mercy> (accessed 12 December 2016).

⁶² L. N. Primiano, ‘Vernacular Religion and the Search for Method in Religious Folklife’, *Western Folklore*, 54(1)(1995) 37-56.

We venerate the face of Jesus in the image. The Lord said ‘I am meek and humble in heart’.
Christ, my dear God, I can see that you are telling the truth, I have never seen such a face.⁶³

Speaking under a copy of the Hyla image in the Łagiewnik Basilica, for Frédéric it was the face of the Merciful Jesus, linked to ‘meekness’, ‘humility’ and simplicity, which had prompted a personified, personal recognition of Christ’s humanity and his divinity. Impelled by the power of this experience to evangelise and express his faith in collective prayer practices, Frédéric gives regular classes to prisoners on the *Diary*, the Chaplet and the Hour of Mercy and concluded his conversion testimony with a metaphorically-laden prayer:

My dear God, let the rays coming from your humble heart touch my heart as well as the hearts of the whole congregation gathered today. I like to hide in their shadows, not only in the sacraments but also in everyday life. I would like to be changed by you ... so that my language becomes merciful, and my feet take me wherever someone needs me.⁶⁴

As Frédéric prays for protection within the shadows of the Divine Mercy rays and to embody Christ in his words and deeds, for others their affective engagement with the devotion, and the physical and mental healing encountered, centres on the Divine (Merciful) Heart. For example, a Filipino woman in London holding down two jobs and burdened by remittances which had led her to seek an unhealthy, addictive escape in gambling, attributed her recovery to a dream of the Merciful Jesus in which the Divine Heart replaced her own.⁶⁵ Within the imagery of the Divine Mercy, many others have also found devotional encouragements to imaginative, mimetic engagement with a fleshy, physically palpable and healing Christ. While this is a contemporaneous spiritual desire not, by any means, confined to the Divine Mercy

⁶³ F. Buttiger, ‘In the World of Olympic Awards’ *Messenger of Divine Mercy*, 2[57](2012), 7.

⁶⁴ Ibid, 8.

⁶⁵ Communicated within an oral history interview with Father Thomas, 8 June 2012, Marian Fathers Centre for the Apostolate in Ealing, London (written notes).

devotion or Saint Faustina, the theological flexibility and practical malleability of the cult resonate easily with the growing corporeality of contemporary spirituality in ethnically diverse forms and a religiously plural environment.⁶⁶ This ‘holistic turn’ is seen in a growing body of literature advocating resort to the Divine Mercy to address cancer⁶⁷ and a symbiotic blending of religion and healing is expressed within a ‘Prayer for Healing’ used by a Filipino Divine Mercy group in London. This prayer treats devotees’ own (and often female) bodies as potentially iconographic representations or ‘vessels’, analogous to Divine Mercy imagery:

Jesus, may Your pure and healthy blood circulate in my ailing organism and may Your pure and healthy body transform my weak unhealthy body, and may a healthy and vigorous life flow once again within me, if it is truly Your Holy Will. Amen.⁶⁸

This language of the Divine Heart and the Divine Blood echoes, as we have seen, the language used by St Faustina herself in recording her embodied, prayerful and life-giving encounters with the Merciful Jesus. In fact, the extensive utilization of the Divine Mercy devotion within some American healthcare settings is attested to by Dr John Bruchalski, a gynaecologist and, more recently, a pro-life platform speaker. Dr Bruchalski runs *Divine Mercy Care*, an organisation that seeks ‘to transform hearts through healthcare’⁶⁹ by combining medical assistance to clients (who are Catholic, evangelical, Jewish, Muslim or agnostic) with ‘mindfulness’ – either through prayer or meditation. As he attests:

The Divine Mercy is the vehicle for a new birth because it’s a great equalizer: we’re all sinners. We all need mercy. And we receive mercy from others, and from God, it changes *everything* – everything. This is practical stuff, not ‘religious fanaticism’.⁷⁰

Throughout the United States in particular, there are countless other examples of

⁶⁶ D. Pasura and M. Bivand Erdal, eds, *Migration, Transnationalism and Catholicism: Global Perspectives* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016).

⁶⁷ R. M. Sobecks, *Divine Mercy Triumph over Cancer* (Stockbridge: Marian Press, 2011).

⁶⁸ Lydia, ‘The Servants of Divine Mercy: Filipino Divine Mercy Formation Group in London’, *Messenger of Mercy*, 1[56](2012), 7–8.

⁶⁹ Carroll, *Loved, Lost, Found*, 130.

⁷⁰ *Ibid*, 131.

medical practitioners and health professionals (often of a conservative religious cast) drawing up on the Divine Mercy in their ministries to the body (as well as the soul), whether in the dentist's chair⁷¹ or through organizations like *Healthcare Professionals for Divine Mercy*.⁷² As paediatric clinician Dr Scot Bateman testifies:

Spirituality is an essential component in the pediatric critical care unit... For the patients, for the parents, and for the medical staff, too, unless you have a way of dealing with suffering, you can't be here. ... The Divine Mercy image shares a message that's so applicable in healthcare delivery - the image of sharing, Jesus sharing His light, sharing His love in very active ways. ... You can almost feel it come on you when you see it. It's what we do in healthcare. That's the image we try to project.⁷³

Though not without its critics, particularly in the context of the highly politicised polemics surrounding religion and healthcare in the United States, elsewhere the blending of recourse to the Divine Mercy (and indeed to other saints, old and new) with mainstream medicine⁷⁴ evidences the transcendence of the European 'culture wars' of the nineteenth century⁷⁵ and the breakdown of the traditional, seeming incompatibility of science and religion.⁷⁶

The evocative and malleable dimensions of the Divine Mercy, modulated through an interpretation that stresses a profoundly embodied encounter and courageous suffering as a means of union with Christ, are developed further in fervent devotees' excavation of St Faustina's own biography. Through a quite recent intensification of devotion to the saint – online and through numerous publications – we see the life of this woman religious read through a register of both the prosaic and

⁷¹ Ibid, 83-90.

⁷² Ibid, 209-216.

⁷³ Ibid, 214.

⁷⁴ A. Harris, 'Ourdes and Holistic Spirituality: Contemporary Catholicism, the Therapeutic and Religious Thermalism', *Culture and Religion* 14(1)(2013), 23-43 and J. Garnett and A. Harris, 'Wounding and Healing: Christian Narratives of Migrant Women in East London', 22(2) (2013) *Women's History Review*, 22(2)(2013), 1-20.

⁷⁵ C. Clark and W. Kaiser, *Culture Wars: Secular-Catholic Conflict in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

⁷⁶ T. Dixon, G. Cantor and S. Pumfrey, eds, *Science and Religion: New Historical Perspectives* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

mystical, the passionate and the stoic. This process perhaps began with the unlikely success of Jerzy Łukaszewicz's 1994 film *Faustina*, for which Dorota Segda won best Polish actress. The millions of Poles who saw the film were introduced to the image of a cheerful, smiling and happy nun, pleased and fulfilled in her vocation to bring the message of God's mercy to a yearning world.⁷⁷ In this, the film drew upon a longstanding trope of saintly nuns on screen, most widely recognized through 1940s Hollywood offerings such as *The Song of Bernadette* and *The Bells of St Mary's*.⁷⁸ While the film now has a worldwide distribution, with subtitles in over a dozen languages, theatrical performances of the life of St Faustina have also followed, including Nancy Scimone's recent, one-woman theatrical performance of *St Faustina – Messenger of Mercy*. Using the *Diary* as her script, and dressed in the habit of the Congregation of the Sisters of Our Lady of Mercy, Scimone toured the play across American churches and received acclaim for helping people to 'see' (and presumably also to 'hear') the Secretary of Divine Mercy.⁷⁹ Echoing the appeals to intimacy and authenticity underpinning the promotional strategies adopted in respect of another modern-made saint, Thérèse of Lisieux,⁸⁰ which also included theatrical adaptations and dramatizations of her writings,⁸¹ in recent years more candid, personalized and 'natural' photos of St Faustina (though not in the same quantity available for Thérèse Martin) have begun to circulate. Within St Faustina's expanded representational repertoire she is now depicted in her pre-postulant years as a cheerful young woman with her sister, or, after taking her vows, subverting the anonymity of the habit with a wry smile. These are in marked contrast to an earlier, 1931 photograph of Sister Faustina – which for a time was the only one circulated – which depicted her as

⁷⁷ See <http://www.filmpolski.pl/fp/index.php?film=126281> and <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tj53aogrLQs> (accessed 16 December 2016).

⁷⁸ C. McDannell, ed, *Catholics at the Movies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

⁷⁹ See <http://www.saintfaustinadrama.net/the-artist-> (accessed 16 December 2016).

⁸⁰ S. Deboick, 'Image, Authenticity and the Cult of Saint Thérèse of Lisieux, 1897-1959' (Unpublished PhD thesis, University of Liverpool, 2011).

⁸¹ Harris, *Faith in the Family*, 202-230.

austere, dour, and physically undistinguished. A further creative extension of her saintly image designed to foster a personalized rapport is epitomized by a recent painting by Ewa Mika, widely accessible on the internet and based on a 1923 photograph, which depicts the warm, open and inviting gaze of a blond, nineteen year old girl who is seemingly ordinary in her sanctity.⁸² The latest biographies of St Faustina have continued this trend, publishing unseen photographs, quoting from her letters to her spiritual director Father Sopoćko, and utilising oral history interviews (collected between 1952-65 for the beatification dossier) with people who knew her.⁸³ In this they seek to move beyond the severity and obscurity of previous depictions of this woman religious, thereby yielding subjectivity, immediacy and intimacy to written descriptions of her life and sanctity. Reinforcing this desire to know and touch (or be touched by) the saint, Faustina's relics in the Krakovian convent are now quarantined off to most visitors but flanked by countless ex votos. Her cell has become a site of pilgrimage and petition, whilst the Płock diocesan museum, near the convent in which she once resided, has a shrine and large-scale exhibition (including sweater fragments).⁸⁴ Touch relics and medallions, echoing the format of the Miraculous medal, circulate for purchase online.⁸⁵

Beyond the ostensibly religious dimensions of the cult, which have gathered considerable momentum online over the last five years, there is a flourishing, lay-auspiced, commercialised and commoditized interest in St Faustina. From tasteful, devotional icons influenced by Orthodox aesthetics, through to the predictable plaster statues and less obvious clothes peg dolls⁸⁶ and an etzy page devoted to St Faustina,⁸⁷

⁸² <https://uk.pinterest.com/pin/258253359858664277/> and <https://uk.pinterest.com/catholicfeast/cf-saint-faustina/> (accessed 16 December 2016).

⁸³ E. K. Czackowska, *Faustina: The Mystic and her Message* (Stockbridge: Marian Press, 2015)

⁸⁴ Górny and Rosikon, *Trust*, 91.

⁸⁵ http://www.divinemercurygiftshop.org/marian/dept.asp?s_id=0&dept_id=3068 (accessed 16 December 2016).

⁸⁶ <https://www.etsy.com/listing/268887826/divine-mercy-and-st-faustina-wooden-peg> (accessed 16 December 2016).

⁸⁷ https://www.etsy.com/market/st_faustina (accessed 16 December 2016).

and you can also buy a Divine Mercy watch – perhaps to supplement the Divine Mercy phone app, reminding petitioners of the 3 o’clock Hour of Mercy.⁸⁸ Virtual prayer sites, with animated votive candles and a ‘prayer line – for which no one need pay’,⁸⁹ abound online, Replacing the pre-conciliar traditions of neighbourhood ‘block rosary’ and sodalities, there are now global virtual Divine Mercy prayer circles established and sustained by blogs and email.⁹⁰ St Faustina’s *Diary*, published as a distinctive, weighty tome with red binding, has also come to function for some devotees as a metaphysically powerful object and active source of communion. For some this takes the form of an almost animated conversation facilitated by the *Diary* (perhaps supplanting the bible) – such as for Donna, who randomly picks passages with which to negotiate personal difficulties and feels ‘the conversing going on between St Faustina and our Saviour is completely relevant to my own personal situation ... [such that] I walk away feeling like I was made a part of the conversation.’⁹¹ For others, the *Diary* has a totemic power, providing a linguistic repertoire to reconcile the murder of a daughter and thereby blog about forgiveness of her killer,⁹² or as a quasi-magical object that persistently ‘called’ for attention and conversion, returning to its owner, Irish businessman Brendan O’Neill, despite theft and a totalising fire.⁹³ Through the interplay of the material and the virtual, the corporeal and the commercially commodified, the evolving cult of St Faustina manifests the chaotic intermixing of the post-modern and the very ancient in approaches to the cult of the saints. As such, within these modes of knowing and

⁸⁸ <https://www.zazzle.co.uk/for+faustina+watches> and <https://itunes.apple.com/gb/app/divine-mercy/id410696366?mt=8> (accessed 16 December 2016).

⁸⁹ <http://www.marian.org/prayerline/> (accessed 16 December 2016).

⁹⁰ On this phenomena more broadly, see B. Janse, A. Tapia and A. Spink, ‘Searching for Salvation: An analysis of US religious searching on the World Wide Web’, *Religion*, 40(2010), 39-52.

⁹¹ <http://www.marian.org/news/Graces-Received-2988> (accessed 16 December 2016).

⁹² Carroll, *Loved, Lost, Found*, 91-99.

⁹³ <http://www.divinemeracy.org/diary/109-true-story-miracle-of-the-diary.html>. In respect of the longstanding Catholic tradition of miraculous objects, see J. Garnett and G. Rosser, *Spectacular Miracles: Transforming Images in Italy from the Renaissance to the Present* (London: Reaktion Books, 2013).

speaking to St Faustina, there is found a creative interplay of saintly charisma and an enduring longing for material, incarnational modes of communication and intercession. In the intensity and fervency of their devotion to St Faustina, these present-day Catholics cited maybe far from typical – but they are symptomatic of a greater number who have added the Divine Mercy to their diverse prayer repertoires and are not averse to supplementing mainstream liturgical practice with online prayer chat-rooms.

For many of her growing number of clients, St Faustina has an intimacy and immediacy surpassing representation or mere materialization, sustained by direct encounter and personalised relationships. In common with the devotional piety often centred on Mary over the centuries,⁹⁴ for many devotees St Faustina is experienced as most present through occasions of believed healing or as a comfort to the drama of the deathbed. One such convert is sixty-something Mille from Puerto Rico, for whom St Faustina was the conduit to fervent devotion for the Merciful Christ.⁹⁵ With tears in her eyes and conviction in her voice, Mille spoke candidly about a medical condition requiring her hospitalization about ten years ago and which culminated in an unequivocal medical diagnosis of imminent blindness. Lying in the ward, a woman in a nun's habit (who was at that point unknown to her) appeared and told her to have faith and trust in Jesus. Spurred on by this encounter to identify the woman – whom she now acknowledges as St Faustina herself – Mille attributes the retention of a functional proportion of her sight over the last decade, and the management of the pain and fear associated with her condition, to her adoption of the Divine Mercy. With the rapid deterioration of her sight in 2011, Mille decided to make a pilgrimage to Kraków in thanksgiving for the preceding years of respite, and has enrolled at a

⁹⁴ E.g. A. Hermkens, W. Jansen and C. Notermans, *Moved by Mary: The Power of Pilgrimage in the Modern World* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009).

⁹⁵ Author's oral history interview with Mille, 21 September 2012, Łagiewniki Sanctuary, Kraków (written notes).

school for the blind to acquire skills for the years ahead.⁹⁶ For Mille, her consoling, transformative encounter with St Faustina and her growing knowledge (through subsequent research) of the saint's own resilience and fortitude in facing a protracted and painful terminal illness has provided resources and encouragement to do the same through her own illness. For others like the American miraculée Dona Kocylowski, there are ties of obligation that undergird a close rapport with the saint. Discovering the Divine Mercy in 2000, and using the chaplet to support her through a breast cancer biopsy (which was ultimately benign), Dona promised St Faustina to spread the message of the Divine Mercy, to pray the chaplet daily but also to 'visit her' at her shrine in Stockbridge, Massachusetts. It was only after this vow of pilgrimage was fulfilled, seven years later, that Dona was cured of the painful, recurrent and seeming incurable mouth ulcers which she had endured since 1976.⁹⁷ Now a public evangelist for the Divine Mercy and the American national shrine, her advice is 'Pray this chaplet often. Believe in the chaplet's power ... Promise her anything – but remember, she will hold you to it.'⁹⁸

This reciprocal, obligatory relationship between saint and client, and the increasingly prominent utilization of the Divine Mercy within health care and nursing settings, was institutionally endorsed in the opening of the 'Divine Mercy Spirituality Centre' in Santo Spirito in Sassia, Rome by Pope John Paul II in 1994. Invoking the connection between the 'health of body and soul' which was a prominent theme of his papacy, and which is a point of surprising (and rare) continuity with Pope Francis', the former pontiff's opening speech praised the providential location of the new centre:

It is very significant and timely that precisely here, next to this very ancient hospital, prayers are

⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁹⁷ <http://www.thedivinemercy.org/news/How-Was-This-Woman-Healed-3721>

⁹⁸ Ibid.

said and work is done with constant care for the health of body and soul.⁹⁹

In the more than two decades that have elapsed, the ‘Divine Mercy Spiritual Centre’ in Rome has formented a flourishing cult to St Faustina – her life size statue presides over banks of votive candles and surveys a plethora of ex-votos in the traditional format of pressed-metal-hearts and donated jewellery (figure 3). As these gifts of thanksgiving attest, the ancient symbolism of the Sacred Heart is now, in an almost palimpsest, syncretic fashion, annexed to the emerging cult of the Merciful Heart.

Extending upon the example of Santo Spirito in Sassia, and recalling Pope Francis’ metaphorical description of the church as a ‘field hospital’, for many lay men and women the most fitting context for the operation of the Divine Mercy devotion is within medical care and hospital settings. Drawing upon the historical examples of St Faustina praying by the bedsides of fellow patients while she was in hospital or saying the Divine Mercy chaplet at the bedside of the dying,¹⁰⁰ nurses like Martha, a former nun born in the Cameroon who has worked as a nurse in a London hospital since 1994, attests to the importance of the Divine Mercy in her palliative care work with cancer patients. Placing her devotion within a wider continuum of ‘the acts of mercy’ she offers to her patients (including her equally strong devotion to the Virgin Mary), Martha describes attending to her patients’ bodily needs and offering emotional and physical comfort, alongside her own private, mostly unarticulated conviction of tending souls and assuring a ‘good death’. As she reflected in an oral history interview, paraphrasing the *Diary* (§687, 282):

it says if you say this prayer, the Divine Mercy chaplet, on the bedside of somebody who is dying He will stand beside that person, not as a just God ... as a merciful God, you know. ... And a lot of my people, a lot of the patients, they don’t want to hear about God, and you don’t even have to mention this thing. So I just silently intercede for them as say, ‘Well God, you know best’ ... But in a few, I think one or two homes, no three actually, who have been

⁹⁹ Górny and Rosikon, *Trust*, 269.

¹⁰⁰ Czaczkowska, *Faustina*, 331ff. and multiple passages within the *Diary*.

Catholics and I came in there and we prayed the Divine Mercy. Oh, I was so moved by it. We prayed the Divine Mercy and they ... allowed me to explain a bit more about it. And we prayed it together and they had just called the priest, themselves called the priest to come and, because she died just as I was coming.¹⁰¹

For Martha there is a palpable sense of the need for such devotional prayer for herself too ('looking after people physically ... and being there spiritually'). Yet for Martha there is a sharp tension created for her, as others, through working in a secular medical context in which expressions of faith are tightly quarantined to official chaplains and formal requests by patients. Martha's testimony reveals her belief in the power and intercessory agency available to the laity, outside sacramental settings such as Penance and Extreme Unction, to minister God's grace and forgiveness to the dying. The holistic nexus that Martha draws between physical care (through her nursing) and 'softening' spiritual succour creates a space for her ministrations outside holy orders and a tacit emulation of elements of the biography of St Faustina. This accent on lay agency, and the customisation of the devotion to address diverse corporeal needs, are elements common to St Faustina's clients despite marked differences in their theological, cultural, geographical or generational backgrounds.

Conclusion: A Saint for the Modern Age?

Bernice, a Mancunian woman in her 70s, has been praying the chaplet of the Divine Mercy for over twenty years since she first read about it in an English Catholic newspaper. It is a prayer she practises regularly and unselfconsciously 'walking to work in the mornings as the prayers are simple and the rosary beads slipped easily through my fingers inside my coat pocket'.¹⁰² Now approaching later life and experiencing thoughts of mortality and bouts of insomnia, she dedicates her regular

¹⁰¹ Oral history interview with Martha, 29 May 2009 (#63–4), Canning Town, London. Transcript and digital tape deposited at Bishopsgate Institute, London.

¹⁰² Written personal communication from Bernice, 26 May 2012, Ashton-under-Lyne, UK.

3am sleepless prayers to ‘those in need of prayer ... praying for souls in their last agony’. Her conviction of the Chaplet’s efficacy is enhanced by its role in providing peace and solace to her (non-religious) neighbour in her last hours:

Poor Betty, she was so agitated and I could see fear in her eyes. The family left me alone with her, and although she didn’t appear to know me, I just held her hand and whispered the prayers for the dying ... A while after I came home and Bernard [her husband] and I prayed the chaplet of Divine Mercy together – just the other side of the wall from where she was lying. Early next morning her daughter came to tell us that she had died in the early hours - shortly after I had left ... and probably whilst we were praying for her – Betty had become very calm and peaceful and had fallen into sleep from which she did not awake. Her family were convinced that the prayers had taken away her fear.¹⁰³

Immersed within the biography of St Faustina, and combining the longstanding practice of the rosary with its re-animation through the Divine Mercy chaplet, Bernice’s testimony encapsulates many of the themes explored throughout this article – the refashioning of ancient devotionals of the church (the rosary, the Angelus) through the lens of St Faustina’s visions and their efficacy in healing (or aiding a good death); the premium on lay intercessory agency; and the efficacy of the Divine Mercy in speaking to people in a modern age that sits uneasily with or has rejected organized religion. In Bernice’s early morning prayers for the dying, facilitated by her insomnia, she is echoing elements of St Faustina’s biography (§809-11, 319-320) and her everyday, habitual recourse to the chaplet (prayed on a rosary) echoes the material intercessory strategies of many of St Faustina’s clients explored through the latter part of this analysis. In describing St Faustina’s biography and her visions, this article has demonstrated the particularized historical context in which the saint lived and is believed to still work, as well as the fresh and innovative dimensions of the devotional practices she inaugurated, which are amplified through modern mass communication and migration. Nevertheless, this exploration has also mapped the elements of St

¹⁰³ Ibid.

Faustina's mysticism and the Divine Mercy repertoire against the contours of centuries-old traditions of female spirituality and the sanctity of women religious. Bernice's story, alongside the examples of other devotees here explored who in their lived religious experiences attest to the help of the Merciful Christ and his 'Secretary', illustrates the resources within the cult of the Divine Mercy to minister to body and soul in a holistic way and often within a medical or therapeutic setting. Here, Bernice's bedside prayers to facilitate a 'good death' are seen as a way of making present and incarnate God's mercy in the face of suffering, especially in times of vulnerability, fragility and a deathbed review of one's life. For others, in negotiating the everyday trials and traumas of living and aging, there is a potent, accessible and malleable resource, which animates the incarnational and material impulses that lie at the heart of Christianity. In its reinvigoration of a dynamic, visceral and metaphorical focus on the Heart of the Saviour, and its summons to the faithful to embody and enact these merciful ministrations in daily life, the unprecedented appeal and creative adaption of St Faustina's message, in its corporeal manifestations and virtual and online circulation, does not show any sign of abatement.

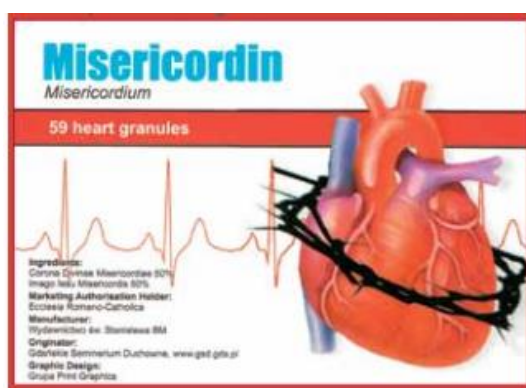


Figure 1: Packaging of rosary beads to pray the Divine Mercy Chaplet, packaged as the medicine 'Misericordin Misericordium'.



Figure 2: Icon of the Divine Mercy by Adolf Hyla, surrounded by *ex votos* and atop the relics of Saint Faustina within the Łagiewniki convent chapel, Kraków, Poland. Author's photo.



Figure 3: A statue of St Faustina, presiding over a bank of votive candles and flanked by *ex votos*, within the 'Divine Mercy Spirituality Centre', Santo Spirito in Sassia, Rome. Author's photo.